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WHITE HOUSE FOR CHIEF OF STAFF JOSHUA BOLTEN
DEPARTMENT FOR S - BRIAN GUNDERSON

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [NATO](#) [PO](#)
SUBJECT: PORTUGUESE PRESIDENT ON AFGHANISTAN DRAWDOWN

REF: LISBON 2882

Classified By: Ambassador Alfred Hoffman for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

¶1. (C) I went alone to my courtesy call on President Cavaco Silva on November 26. It was a warm meeting in which we both described the excellent state of bilateral relations but focused mostly on a constructive discussion of the recent Portuguese decision to draw down combat forces in Afghanistan. Cavaco Silva attributed the decision to the need to relieve overstretched commando and paratrooper units but said Portugal is considering other ways in which it might contribute. He shared his view that NATO should be doing much more to train Afghan security forces and should be reducing its role in combat operations. I pressed him to commit to the principle of equivalent substitution; he replied only that they are considering the possibilities. I believe there is flexibility in Cavaco Silva's position, and suggest that a meeting with President Bush would make a difference. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In my farewell call on President Cavaco Silva on November 26, the President described U.S.-Portugal relations as "wonderful." He congratulated me for strengthening bilateral linkages in the business and education sectors, and said his wife had great affection for Mrs. Hoffman and considered her a friend. I thanked the President and relayed a recent conversation I had with former President George H.W. Bush, saying the former President hoped to see Cavaco Silva in Kennebunkport next summer.

Afghanistan

¶3. (C) I told Cavaco Silva I had thoroughly enjoyed my two-year assignment in Portugal and believed the bilateral relationship was in very good shape. I then noted I had had two big disappointments during my time here. First had been my inability to arrange a meeting between Cavaco Silva and the current President Bush, and the second had been Portugal's recent decision to reduce its company-size deployment to ISAF in Afghanistan in August 2008 (reftel). The latter issue had been particularly troubling, I emphasized, given that it came only six weeks after President Bush had praised Prime Minister Socrates in the Oval Office for its contributions in Afghanistan, and Socrates had expressed Portugal's strong commitment to NATO efforts there. I expressed regret that I still had not received an explanation for the drawdown decision.

¶4. (C) Cavaco Silva replied that the decision had been motivated by a desire to relieve the enormous strain on Portuguese paratroopers and commandos, who have been regularly rotated into Afghanistan for some time now. Allied efforts, he said, should focus increasingly on training Afghan forces to provide for the country's security and less on combat operations. Portugal is now examining other ways to contribute; deployment of an OMLT and a C-130 are a step in that direction, and he had asked his "people" to look at other possible contributions.

¶5. (C) In examining its options, I asked whether the President would commit to the principle of "equivalent substitution," ensuring that Portugal's commitment would change only in nature but not in scope. He made no promises, saying only that Portugal was considering the possibilities. He recalled that he had earlier, at the Ambassador's request, increased Portugal's participation in the NATO Training Mission in Iraq from six personnel to nine, as a gesture of support for U.S. efforts in that country. As Portugal looks to August 2008, it would keep a similar objective in mind. Asked when he might be in a position to commit to equivalent substitution in Afghanistan, he replied "Perhaps I will have some more news when next I see you (in Kennebunkport)."

Comment

¶6. (C) The principal impression I took away from this meeting was there is some flexibility in Cavaco Silva's position. He clearly thinks NATO should be doing much more to train Afghan security forces, and I suspect he will give serious consideration to increasing the number of Portuguese OMLTs there. In separate discussions, senior military leaders have dismissed the argument that ISAF operations have placed an undue strain on Portuguese paratroopers and commanders -- they insist they are fully capable of continued combat deployments in Afghanistan. Virtually everyone in government, from the Prime Minister down, was not supportive of the drawdown decision.

¶7. (C) I suspect Cavaco Silva's pressing hard for a reduction in Portuguese combat forces was driven in part by personal pique at having his request turned down for a meeting with President Bush last June, during the former's first visit to Washington as Portugal's commander-in-chief. I am convinced that confirmation of a meeting with President Bush -- regardless of venue -- prior to August 2008 would make a difference in leading Cavaco Silva to reconsider his push for a Portuguese drawdown in Afghanistan. Such a commitment from Cavaco Silva should, of course, be made in advance of any meeting.

Hoffman